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SUBJECT: RUSSIA DENIES VISAS TO LITHUANIAN STUDENTS WISHING TO HONOR  
DEPORTEE GRAVES IN SIBERIA

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SUMMARY  
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1. (SBU) The Russian Embassy in Vilnius denied visas on July 21 to members of a local youth organization that planned to visit the Siberian graves of Soviet-era Lithuanian deportees. The Council of Lithuanian Youth Organizations (LiJOT) planned the expedition to the Krasnoyarsk region, where Soviets sent 165 Lithuanians to serve as laborers in 1948. LiJOT has written a letter to Lithuania's president, parliament, and government asking for assistance. The Foreign Ministry voiced its objection to the visa refusals and stated that Russia should expect a reciprocal response. End summary.

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VISA DENIAL REFLECTS A DIFFERENT APPROACH TO HISTORY  
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2. (SBU) The Council of Lithuanian Youth Organizations (LiJOT), which represents the interests of national youth organizations and promotes community involvement and political awareness, planned a trip to the Krasnoyarsk region in Siberia. Of an estimated 150,000 Lithuanians sent to work camps and prisons during Soviet occupation, the Soviets forced 165 of those into service as forestry workers in Krasnoyarsk in 1948. Approximately 50 Lithuanians are buried in a cemetery in the region. According to the trip's itinerary, the participants would learn about the living conditions of those exiled during the Soviet occupation and have the opportunity to decorate the graves of Lithuanian exiles who perished there. Additionally, the visit would provide Lithuanian youth leaders with a first-hand experience to describe to fellow students back home. To raise public awareness of the tour, former Lithuanian Ambassador to the United States, Vygaudas Usackas, and his son signed up to take part.

3. (SBU) LiJOT told us the Russian Embassy did not provide a reason for the visa refusals. LiJOT said that the Russians viewed the commemoration of victims of Soviet rule as a politically sensitive subject, and the organization's president believes this is the sole reason for the visa denials. LiJOT succeeded in organizing a similar trip to Irkutsk, Russia, in June 2006. Members of that group went to a Lithuanian cemetery and met with local descendants of Lithuanian exiles. However, LiJOT's president expects his group will not receive visas for further expeditions planned for August. In anticipation of this move, the organization has written letters to Lithuania's president, parliament, and government, asking for help in obtaining visas for future expeditions to other places of exile in the Komya, Tomsk, Perm, and Tumen regions of Russia.

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REFUSAL IRKS FOREIGN MINISTRY  
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4. (SBU) Lithuania's Foreign Ministry has formally protested

Russia's decision. A ministry official publicly stated that the Lithuanian response to the incident will be based on parity in visa issuance. The deputy chair of the Parliamentary Foreign Affairs Committee, Audronius Azubalis, criticized Russia's conduct in the matter and said that, in refusing to issue visas to a group of Lithuanian youth going to Siberia to visit the graves of Lithuanian exiles, Russia resembles Belarus.

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COMMENT  
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15. (SBU) Russia's continued refusal to recognize the forced annexation of Lithuania by the Soviet Union and its efforts to block public recognition of Lithuanian deportations only serve to embitter local attitudes toward Russia. With energy security woes, Russia's sheltering of disgraced politician Viktor Uspaskich, and airspace violations currently defining Lithuanian public views of Russia, these visa denials will only reinforce the common (if not unanimous) view here that Russia is a hostile state.

KELLY